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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT WITH HIZBALLAH: MAJOR
DIFFERENCES OVER SYRIA, ARMS, SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

REF: 08 BEIRUT 1541

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In his January 21 meeting with Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt reportedly expressed his fundamental disagreement with Hizballah over Hizballah's relationship with Syria, Hizballah's arms, and the Special Tribunal. As such, he was not interested in a political relationship that Hizballah appeared to be seeking. While press portrayed the meeting as "warm," despite disagreements over Hizballah's arms and Syria, and focused on security issues, the opposition Druze were disappointed with the meeting, citing Jumblatt's complete rejection of any efforts at reconciliation. Jumblatt, at least for the moment, appears to be firmly wedded to March 14, despite the risks of further conflicts with Hizballah in the Chouf. End summary.

¶2. (C) Druze MP Akram Shuhayeb, who attended the much anticipated January 21 meeting between Hizballah and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblatt, briefed Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor on January 22. Participants at the meeting included, on Jumblatt's side, Minister Wael Abou Faour, Shuhayeb, MP Alaa Terro, and PSP Vice President Duraïd Yaghi (the PSP's senior Shi'a member). The Hizballah delegation, led by MP Mohamad Raad, also included MPs Ali Ammar, Jamal Taqsh, and Ali Mokdad, as well as Wafiq Safa, Hizballah's security chief, and Mohmoud Qmati, a member of Hizballah's politburo. Lebanese Democratic Party (LDP) and opposition Druze leader Talal Arslan hosted the meeting, accompanied by Walid Barakat, the LDP's Secretary General.

JUMBLATT: "I WILL NEVER
SHAKE HANDS WITH BASHAR"

¶3. (C) Shuhayeb described the meeting as "okay," noting that Jumblatt had said he was open to meeting with Hizballah two months ago, following majority leader Saad Hariri's conversation with Hassan Nasrallah (reftel). Shuhayeb believed one of the main objectives of the meeting for Hizballah and Arslan was to reconcile Jumblatt with the

Syrians. Reading from his notes of the meeting, Shuhayeb said Jumblatt stated he would never shake hands with Bashar even if he was left standing alone. To Raad's assertion that Hizballah operates independent of Syria, Jumblatt reportedly made it clear that he knew Syria really held the reins. Shuhayeb remarked that, in contrast to Arslan, Hizballah never defended the Syrians at any point in the meeting, nor did it comment on the Special Tribunal, another issue on which Jumblatt told Hizballah he did not see eye to eye.

14. (C) Asked by Raad whether Saudi King Abdullah had coordinated his Arab reconciliation efforts in Kuwait with the Egyptians and Kuwaitis, Jumblatt said he did not know, but noted that the King was a strong supporter of Arab solidarity and Lebanon. Lebanon, he added, should not pay the price for a divided Arab world. Raad injected that, after what happened to the Palestinians in Gaza, Hizballah would never accept border demarcation with Syria. Shuhayeb said no one reacted to this during the meeting, but he interpreted the statement to mean Hizballah was intent on preventing any efforts to block its own arms shipments from Syria.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE MUST
DECIDE ON HIZBALLAH'S ARMS

15. (C) Agreeing with Raad that Israel was the enemy of all Lebanese, Jumblatt however stressed that the question was how to address the problem, through the government or the "resistance," and that this was for the National Dialogue to

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decide. Raad reportedly stressed that the May 2008 events were exceptional circumstances and would not happen again.

16. (C) Note: The fourth Dialogue session will take place at Baabda Palace under President Sleiman's chairmanship on January 26. Participants agreed at the third session to form a military committee to study defense strategy suggestions. In a statement issued January 21, Sleiman said, "At every session, we write down common points pending political calm in order to better plan for a national strategy that gathers and guarantees Lebanon's strength." Shuhayeb did not believe anything would change at the next session. End note.

JUMBLATT REJECTS POLITICAL DEAL

17. (C) Shuhayeb concurred that Hizballah "basically wanted a political deal" with Jumblatt, adding that Raad had said Hizballah's primary goal was not just to keep things calm on the ground, but to develop a "relationship" with Jumblatt. However, he did not believe Jumblatt ever would ally with Hizballah because of its relationship with Syria. He believed Hizballah's motivation stemmed from fears that an Israel-Syria agreement would be at its expense. He noted again that Hizballah did not once defend Syria during the meeting. Furthermore, as local reaction to the January 8 and 14 rocket attacks against Israel demonstrated, the Shia in southern Lebanon did not want to be dragged into another war, and Hizballah knew Israel would retaliate strongly against any attack by Hizballah. The situation with the Christians also was very sensitive, and Hizballah did not want to hurt Aoun, he said.

JUMBLATT - NASRALLAH MEETING UNLIKELY

18. (C) According to Shuhayeb, Arslan, stressing that he was entrenched in the opposition, said he wanted to keep the security situation calm, and declared himself a mediator between Hizballah and Jumblatt in the meeting. Arslan was trying to show the Syrians and Hizballah he was defending their interests in Lebanon and showing Hizballah he could "deliver" Jumblatt, in Shuhayeb's view. Jumblatt preferred

any future meetings to be directly with Hizballah (i.e., without Arslan), Shuhayeb said, although he did not believe the Syrians would ever allow Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah to meet with Jumblatt.

JUMBLATT DEFENDS MARCH 14 ALLIES

¶9. (C) Responding to Raad's attempt to criticize Jumblatt ally Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, Jumblatt fired back with his own attack on Hizballah ally Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement. Both leaders had their histories, he said, but Geagea was now a positive factor in Lebanese politics.

¶10. (C) Jumblatt also warned Hizballah against Aoun's efforts to encourage smaller confessional groups to ally against the Sunnis. For example, rather than seeking the support of small groups like the Alawites and feeding on alliances of minorities, Hizballah should embrace Lebanon's pluralistic society and seek broader support. Citing the recent U.S. elections, Jumblatt praised the U.S. style of democracy, even if one did not always agree with its policies.

OPPOSITION DRUZE DISAPPOINTED

¶11. (C) Arslan advisor Marwan Abu Fadel, who was not/not present at the Jumblatt meeting, described the meeting as "cold," complaining to Senior LES Political Advisor on January 22 that Jumblatt was completely negative. Jumblatt was unreceptive to any attempts at reconciliation with Syria, refused any sort of political alliance with Hizballah, and attacked Hizballah's arms, he said. Furthermore, Jumblatt refused Arslan's request to have one of his candidates in Baabda. (Shuhayeb reported that Jumblatt also told Arslan he

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could not give him a seat in Aley, but would help him with a ministerial position in the next government.)

¶12. (C) In Abu Fadel's opinion, Jumblatt was firmly grounded in March 14. He opined that Jumblatt was making a mistake, given the current Arab reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria, and claimed Bashar would go to Saudi Arabia next week. Abu Fadel also said he intended to brief Aoun on the Jumblatt meeting later the same day.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Although the purported reason for the January 21 meeting between Jumblatt and Hizballah was to maintain calm in the Chouf and other predominantly Druze areas, it seems clear Hizballah was testing the waters for a possible political alliance with Jumblatt, a la 2005 quadripartite agreement. In a separate meeting with Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor on January 21, Arslan advisors Abu Fadel and Marwan Khaireddine claimed Jumblatt had told Arslan during their January 5 dinner that the Druze should not pay the price for his mistakes, and that he had chosen the "losing camp." Jumblatt himself told us on January 14 that Hizballah was on the "winning side."

¶14. (C) The account of the January 21 meeting with Hizballah suggests, however, that Jumblatt has not thrown in the towel. Furthermore, his staunch defense of Geagea and overt support for the U.S. during the meeting indicate that he remains wedded to March 14. If Jumblatt sticks to his guns (and we see nothing at this stage to indicate he won't), he may be setting himself (and the Druze) up for more conflict in the Chouf. For the moment, however, his adherence to principles appears to be overriding any fears he may have of Hizballah. Ambassador will meet with Jumblatt next week to follow-up on these issues.

